

Catalonia could follow Scotland in using its independence movement as leverage to win more devolved powers

lse blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2014/09/17/catalonia-could-follow-scotland-in-using-its-independence-movement-as-leverage-to-win-more-devolved-powers/

17/09/2014

Scotland voted No to independence on 18 September, in part because the leaders of the three main parties in Westminster offered the country a deal to devolve more powers to the Scottish Parliament. [Ainslie Noble](#) writes on the differences between the campaigns in Scotland and Catalonia. She argues that with the Spanish government acting to prevent Catalonia from holding a referendum, the popular support for independence could similarly be used as leverage to push for more devolved powers.

On 9 November, 2014, Catalonia plans to hold a non-binding referendum for independence from Spain. This will follow Scotland's referendum on 18 September, when the country opted to stay in the UK. Yet, while there are similarities between these two regions, such as a 300 year old union with their parent state, they each have different reasons for wanting independence.

It might seem that the recent European economic crisis is to blame for the Catalan independence initiative. Indeed, the region's current leader Artur Mas [has lamented](#) Spain's refusal to re-negotiate Catalonia's fiscal agreement, while politicians such as [Soledad Balaguer](#), journalists such as [Pilar Rahola](#) and economists such as [Mireia Borrell-Porta](#) and [Xavier Sala-i-Martin](#) resent a central government which does not re-distribute Catalonia, Spain's [most prosperous](#) regional economy's contributions fairly.

[Many economists](#) agree with Catalan claims that the deficit between what the region pays to Madrid and what it receives in return for public spending amounts to around 16 billion euros annually. Catalan historian [Enric Ucelay Da Cal](#) agrees that the economic crisis has influenced the rise of Catalan separatism but he argues that this is because it is seen as destroying distinctive hallmarks of Catalan culture such as small business. Spain's lack of consideration for the Catalan language and culture has also become a [common gripe](#) among Catalans themselves.

These accusations have put Madrid in a precarious position. A long tradition of negotiation has allowed Catalans to successfully bargain with Spain for a level of political and cultural recognition. Indeed, it seemed that the latest reward for this pragmatism was Catalonia's 2006 [Statute of autonomy](#) including mention of the region as a 'nation' and affirming further control in legal, linguistic and financial matters.

However, in mid-2010, the Constitutional Court of Spain ruled that fourteen out of the [129 articles of the Statute were unconstitutional](#) and that another twenty-seven would need to be interpreted as per the Court's ruling. What followed was a discernable change in Catalan attitudes towards Madrid and increased support for independence. For example, over one million Catalan demonstrators [took to the streets](#) in Barcelona to protest the Constitutional Court's decision and the nationalist leaning CiU returned to power later that year.



Credit: Steve Oldham (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The Catalan national day or [diada of 2012](#) was marked by the presence of a new slogan “Catalan, new European State”. An estimated [1.5 million](#) participants in the traditional march made it the largest to date. Two months later in mid-December, the Catalan Parliament [set the date of the referendum](#) for 9 November 2014, which was immediately [declared](#) illegal by the Spanish Parliament. Yet, while [Artur Mas](#) concedes that a ‘Yes’ vote would not give Catalonia independence, it would provide greater leverage to negotiate more powers for Catalonia within Spain.

With [recent polls](#) indicating that Catalan support for independence sits around 45 per cent, Catalonia is clearly envious of Scotland’s legally sanctioned referendum. The Scottish National Party (SNP) has been similarly envious of Catalan popular support for independence as many polls leading up to the Scottish referendum [originally suggested](#) that Scots were not as keen for independence as their Catalan counterparts, although they narrowed sharply as the vote approached.

A major factor influencing Catalonia’s desire for secession is that many Catalans feel that Spain does not respect Catalan culture. Yet, unlike many ‘ethno-nationalisms’ which use language such as in Catalonia or religion as strong rallying points, Scotland lacks such a common cause. Scots-Gaelic has all but fallen into disuse and unlike the Irish, religion is not a marker of Scottish identity.

History is, however, an important basis for Scottish national identity. Indeed, the date of Scottish referendum fell on the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Perhaps the SNP had been optimistic that the commemorations of Robert the Bruce’s epic defeat over the English Army would re-awaken Scottish nationalism. Scottish identity is complex, however, with many Scots retaining a sense of belonging to the UK and the SNP stating, for instance, that had Scotland opted for independence the Queen would have remained its head of state. Furthermore, according to Britain’s National Center for Social Research, when given a choice of listing several identities, up to [40 per cent](#) (45 per cent in 2012) of Scots have consistently chosen British and Scottish.

The current road to Scottish independence has been driven by the SNP. As Holyrood’s [first majority government](#) in 2011, it moved ahead with its plans for an independence referendum. As polls taken around this time indicated that Scottish support for independence was sitting around [30 per cent](#), the success of the SNP cannot be attributed solely to its independence platform. So what is the rationale for secession from the UK?

The SNP’s [White Paper](#), a document outlining the SNP’s plans for an independent Scotland, provides an instructive insight into why some Scots wish to leave the Union. A recurrent theme in the White Paper is that Scotland lacks the appropriate decision making power in important domains such as taxation and public spending. According to the White Paper, the main principles underpinning the need for independence are: “Democracy, Prosperity and Fairness”. In other words, freedom from British rule.

A bone of contention since the 1970s has been the UK’s alleged [mismanagement](#) of the vast oil reserves off Scotland’s North Sea. Another is the controversial ‘[bedroom tax](#)’ and [poll tax](#). SNP leader, Alex Salmond is also an ardent supporter of the [environment](#) and believes that independence will allow Scotland the freedom to explore renewable energy and enact legislation on the reduction of emissions. He [promised](#) that an independent Scotland would be nuclear free with the intended removal of the British Trident programme, which houses the UK’s nuclear weapons system on Scotland’s west coast.

Despite the positives presented in the White Paper, there has been hesitancy over the benefits of independence, likely due to the uncertainty it raises. For example, there were doubts over the issue of whether Scotland would have been able to seamlessly transfer its EU membership and maintain the UK specific opt-outs it currently enjoys such as generous EU subsidies, non-membership of the Eurozone and Schengen area. The SNP banked on the principle of “[continuity of effects](#)”, according to which, an independent Scotland should, more or less, have been able to pick up where it left off as part of the UK. Yet, Scotland would have potentially had to formally apply as a separate member of the EU. Furthermore, [Spain or Belgium](#), fearful that Scotland’s EU membership might provide an incentive for their own separatist movements, could in theory have vetoed Scotland’s entry into the EU.

With Scotland voting against independence on 18 September, the Catalans will have watched the result with anticipation. An independent Scotland would have buoyed the Catalan cause and set a hopeful precedent for Catalonia's own public debate. The No vote however has brought a collective sigh of relief to those in Scotland and the UK who do not want to see a three centuries old Union ripped apart to face an uncertain future. However, the Catalans need not necessarily be discouraged by the No vote, though Madrid will no doubt be pleased. Furthermore, while a positive result in Catalonia's own plebiscite will not mean secession, at least in the near future, it will likely provide Catalonia the leverage it needs to achieve its political, cultural and fiscal desires.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1woIF2B>

About the author

Ainslie Noble

Ainslie Noble is the author of *Memory, Identity and Violence: Comparing Contemporary Catalonia and the Basque Country in France and Spain*. She has a PhD from the University of Melbourne. She is a contributing analyst at Wikistrat and has expertise in secessionist movements in Europe including those in France, Spain, Italy and Scotland. Her current research involves examining the role of history in separatist movements in the context of the 'supra-national' European Union.

-